

## Disability in Bhutan

Most disabled people have difficulties in finding order, structure, security, happiness, self-esteem and safety in their own lives and surroundings, to varying degrees, depending on the characteristics and extent of their impairment. Many disabled people seem more unfortunate and disadvantaged compared to able people. There are many forms of disability; some are congenital, some come at a later stage with accidents, some come after prolonged sickness, whilst others are the result of inadequate care. In most cases the disabled are not at all responsible for their disabilities. Who then, will take responsibility for their disabilities? In Buddhism we can explain the cause by attributing it to their “Karma”. But, can we leave them un-cared for and un-attended to, by believing that it is their “Karma” and there is nothing we can or should do? Society at large should not only be considerate and compassionate towards these groups of people, but also support them and provide opportunities for them to lead as fulfilling a life as possible.

In one of the earliest household surveys of disability conducted by the Health Department in 2002, 6,881 disabled people were identified (Table 1). The first official government census in Bhutan was completed in 2005 and shows a population of about 650,000. Thus it would seem that at least 1% of the population has some sort of disability. More adapted research methodology would indicate a higher percentage.

**Table 1: Disabled people identified across Bhutan, 2002**

Type of disability	Number of children under 14	Number of adults	Total number
Difficulty hearing/speaking	397	3007	<b>3404</b>
Difficulty seeing	150	1153	<b>1303</b>
Difficulty moving	164	815	<b>979</b>
Fits	103	359	<b>462</b>
Difficulty learning	47	214	<b>261</b>
Strange behavior	24	162	<b>186</b>
No feeling in hands/feet	18	150	<b>168</b>
Others	30	88	<b>118</b>
<b>Total number</b>	<b>933</b>	<b>5948</b>	<b>6881</b>

As early as the 1980s, the National Institute for the Disabled was established by the Royal Government of Bhutan in the Eastern part of the country. This Institute, however, focuses on providing education to children with visual impairment only; approximately 40 such children are enrolled annually.

The Ministry of Health also implements Community Based Rehabilitation initiatives to help the development of disabled people with the involvement and support of the community.

More recently, one school in Thimphu was upgraded to provide facilities for physically challenged children to join regular classes, and a specialized school for the deaf was opened in Paro in 2004.

Currently the Royal Government of Bhutan is planning to integrate inclusive education into its education curriculum. This requires long-term planning and teacher-training and it will be several years before this new policy will benefit the many disabled children currently kept at home.

However, all the above facilities are exclusively geared towards schooling disabled children, leaving the needs of non- school going disabled youth and children still largely marginalized. On this front DVTCD is a pioneer.